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THE DAUGHTERS OF CHARITY

In 1633, the Daughters of Charity were founded in Paris by Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac.

A brief history:

The first "Charities" (or Confraternities) were organized by Saint Vincent in 1617, at Châtillon-les-Dombes.

The Confraternities at that time were composed of women from relatively modest backgrounds, who wished to devote themselves to the service of the poor and the sick in their villages or parishes.

When these Confraternities appeared in Paris, Ladies of the nobility or from the high bourgeoisie (upper middle class) were drawn by Monsieur Vincent's apostolic zeal and enthusiasm to become dedicated members.

However, their family obligations, and/or their social rank, made it difficult for them to render humble service in the homes of the poor. Some of the Ladies felt duty bound to send their servants in their stead. The latter most often accomplished these tasks more through constraint than through charity.

Meanwhile Marguerite Naseau, of Suresnes (now a suburb of Paris), presented herself to Monsieur Vincent (whom she had met during a mission in her parish). She desired to serve the poor but gratuitously, for the love of God. Intelligent and courageous, she was assigned to serve in the Confraternity of St. Nicolas du Chardonnet, in Paris, and was soon followed by other young girls, most of whom, like herself, came from rural areas.

In 1630, Monsieur Vincent entrusted these young girls to Mademoiselle Le Gras (Louise de Marillac), who was already assisting him in the organization, visitation and follow-up of the Confraternities founded by Monsieur Vincent and his first Confreres in places where they "gave" missions.

These generous volunteers (already totally given to God for the service of the poor) were then dispersed throughout Paris, each one serving in a different Confraternity. Quickly, Louise de Marillac perceived the need to bring them together, so that she could give them a better formation and accompany them in their services, corporal as well as spiritual.

After mature deliberations, she obtained authorization from Monsieur Vincent to bring them together; and, on November 29, 1633, she received the first six

Daughters into her home. (By the definition of the epoch, these "Daughters" were servants of the "Ladies" of Charity).

This date marks the official "birth" of the Company of the Daughters of Charity.

The Company was a novelty in the Church of that era, which did not permit Religious women to leave their cloisters.

In order to safeguard the service of the poor, Monsieur Vincent recommended that his Daughters care for the poor in their homes, so that they might get to know them in their natural setting. He always counseled the Sisters to be good Christians first, to promise God to serve him faithfully in the poor and to describe themselves as such, to anyone who asked for an explanation of their "status".

The Daughters of Charity then are not Religious (nuns), in the canonical sense of the term, but they are consecrated to Jesus Christ for the service of the poor.

The Company was approved:

* by the Archbishop of Paris in 1655,

* by Rome in 1668.

Since its beginning, the Company has always been and remains subject to the authority of the Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission. Louise de Marillac wanted it this way, in order to preserve unity in the Company.

At the present time:

For more than 300 years, the tree has put down roots and expanded!

The Company of the Daughters of Charity (statistics of January 1, 1995) is composed of 2,957 Houses with a total of 27,223 Sisters, among whom 368 are Novices (or Seminary Sisters).

Present in the five continents, the Company is divided into 81 Provinces and Regions, which are grouped as follows:

* Western Europe:	1,604 Houses	15,491 Sisters	61 Novices
* Eastern Europe:	203	2,574	35
* Africa:	129	818	44
* North America:	139	1,217	8
* Central and South America:	684	5,214	120
* Asia:	176	1,446	98

The Company of the Daughters of Charity is recognized by the Church as a "Society of Apostolic Life in Community".

The spirit and the convictions of the Daughters of Charity:

According to Saint Vincent's own words in the first Rule: *"The principal end to which God has called and established the Daughters of Charity is to honor our Lord Jesus Christ as the source and model of all charity, serving him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor..."*

The rule of the Daughter of Charity is Christ, Evangelizer of the poor, identified with the humblest, and the most destitute.

The Mystery of the Incarnation is at the center of the spirituality of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise (themselves disciples of the French School of Spirituality).

The Daughters of Charity choose to give themselves totally to God by radically following the Evangelical Counsels.

In this way they are available for the service of Christ in the poor, and they consecrate themselves totally to him by annual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service of the poor.

Their mission:

Consequently, according to the wish of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise, the Daughters of Charity are servants of Jesus Christ for every corporal and spiritual service of the poor, which may be confided to them.

Consecrated in a community of communal life for this mission, they combine service and contemplation.

Their relationship to God is simple and strong, founded on union with God by means of silence, personal and community prayer, a sacramental life, in particular the Eucharist, and recourse to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Actually, the Company has professed being Marian since its origins. In 1640, Monsieur Vincent explained to his Daughters the rule which stated clearly that "the Company is established to love, honor and serve Jesus Christ and his Holy Mother...". On her part, Saint Louise confided the newborn Company to Our Lady of Chartres and enkindled in her Daughters a devotion to Mary, Mother of the Church and of the little Company.

Since 1830, the Chapel of the Motherhouse (140, rue du Bac, in Paris), site of the Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Saint Catherine Labouré (then a Novice of the Daughters of Charity), is a very important place of pilgrimage and Marian devotion in France. Several thousand pilgrims (approximately 20,000 on major feast days) come each day to venerate and implore Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, for all their intentions and those of the Church and the whole world.

Attention to the signs of the times, to the appeals of the Church and to the world of the poor enables the Company to be available and mobile throughout the world for any service, while being constantly concerned to inculturate the spirit and the teachings of Saint Vincent; that is to say, with desire to respect each person and to promote the culture of each country.

The Company is missionary from its very foundation. Saint Vincent did not hesitate to send Daughters on the highways and byways of the world, outside the "kingdom of France".

The missions extend to all countries and are directed by Sister Missionaries who work in collaboration with the local Churches. The Sister Missionaries live with their native Sisters in a community of communal life where vocations are fostered.

The service:

According to the Founders' desire, when choices are to be made, priority is to be given to the poorest of the poor.

Saint Vincent was moved by the misery of the sick in their homes, who had neither the money nor the courage to go to the hospitals of that time, to be treated. For many of them, these hospitals recalled the great "enclosure" of the poor. This is the reason why Saint Vincent wanted his Daughters to go to meet the poor, to seek them out in their homes, particularly the destitute and most abandoned.

Nevertheless, our Founders tried to respond rapidly to the appeals of the Ladies and/or Administrators who were asking for Daughters of Charity for the hospitals or other institutions of that era. (That is how it happened that Saint Louise brought her first Daughters to Angers in 1639).

Wherever the Daughters serve, their service is always described as corporal and spiritual (in fact, Saint Vincent never wanted the one to be separated from the other).

Consequently service includes:

1. **Service** (under all forms) and human and spiritual accompaniment

- of the sick of all ages: children, adults, the elderly (lepers, persons with AIDS, drug addicts, alcoholics, the mentally ill, etc.);
- of the physically handicapped: the blind, the deaf and the mute, those with nervous system or cerebral disorders, or others.

According to the circumstances of places or cultures, these persons are cared for:

- at home;
- in hospitals, specialized institutions, treatment or rehabilitation centers.

2. Taking charge of children and adolescents:

- by welcoming (in every sense of the word) underprivileged children (in reality, abandoned);
 - * in children's homes, nurseries, day care centers, nutrition centers,
 - * camps and vacation villages,
 - * and caring for "street children";
- on the school level:
 - * by supporting institutions which welcome young people with learning disabilities or who have difficulty being inserted into an active and productive life (vocational schools, technical schools, etc.);
 - * by being involved in literacy programs, remedial courses, etc.;
- for education in the faith: catechesis, spiritual accompaniment in chaplaincies, clubs or associations of every kind.

3. Human, social and spiritual support for all the poor, through every kind of social service, welcome centers, "hands on services", including:

- * visiting prisoners and/or welcoming their families;
- * being present in refugee camps;
- * offering diverse services to immigrants, displaced persons, etc.

In order to give the best service possible, and to defend the rights of the poor in all areas where the poor call for help, the Daughters of Charity strive to work in collaboration with Civil Authorities, Christians Associations (Vincentian Laity as well as others) and all those persons of good will who want to commit themselves to the service of their destitute brothers and sisters.

Formation:

In order to be effective and to adapt to each situation, service of the poor demands human, professional and spiritual formation. This involves listening to the needs of the poor and especially to those "rejected" by our changing world. The

Company is solicitous that the Daughters of Charity acquire all the qualifications needed for the various services they must assume, for example, formation in:

- * human relations, group work and those skills necessary for collaboration in their different services;
- * health and social professions;
- * the domain of teaching and education;
- * catechetics and pastoral ministry;
- * missionary service through study of the language and culture of the country to which they are sent.

The Daughters of Charity are cognizant of the need for an initial and on-going formation and for continual renewal in order to always be ready "to leave God for God".

To be servants totally given, competent and joyous, is an obligation in justice towards our "Lords and Masters, the Poor" (Saint Vincent).

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